

American military commissaries mark their 140th anniversary

Story by
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DeCA

American military commissaries, the “supermarkets to the military” at bases in the United States and across the globe, will reach their 140th anniversary on July 1.

On that day in 1867, the Army was authorized by Congress to begin selling food items, called “commissary” items, “at cost,” to Soldiers of all ranks. This landmark event began the modern era of American military commissaries.

Commissaries today little resemble the warehouses that doubled as sales stores in 1867, but there are vital similarities: they still sell food items, at cost, to officers and enlisted alike, providing a savings benefit that encourages reenlistment by stretching military paychecks. They also boost morale by providing “a taste of home” to locations around the world.

In the 19th century, Army rations lacked the variety and balance necessary to maintain health. Soldiers supplemented their diets by purchasing healthful foods, such as canned fruits and vegetables, from licensed vendors known as “sutlers.” Starting in 1825, officers were allowed to buy commissary items at cost from the subsistence department, but enlisted men had to continue buying

from sutlers, who sold for a profit. The result of this class division was that enlisted men paid higher prices for nonration food items than did their officers.

During the Civil War, many Soldiers were poorly served by sutlers who overcharged or provided poor-quality goods. After the war, Congress decided that enlisted men should receive the same shopping privileges officers had already enjoyed for four decades and extended the benefit to all ranks.

At the time, no other nation provided for its enlisted men in such a fashion. The practice was wise, frugal, just and generous, as well as distinctly democratic and proudly American. At first, the stores were open to all active-duty Army personnel, and even civilians could shop at certain posts. The first stock list, in 1868, consisted of 82 items and made the sales commissaries (as they were called at that time) similar to civilian general stores of that era.

As time passed, the benefit changed and improved. Civilian post traders, who had been permitted to sell anything commissaries did not carry, were abolished in 1893, and the modern exchange system took their place in 1895. The first overseas commissaries opened in the Philippines in 1899. After the Navy and Marine

Corps opened their first commissaries in 1910, personnel from any service could patronize any commissary run by the other armed services.

Retired enlisted men became fully eligible shoppers in 1914, spouses and Family members were shopping by the 1930s (and earlier in many locations), the Air Force assumed control of Army Air Force stores in 1947-48; and in 1952, a permanent surcharge was added, enabling commissaries to pay many of their own construction costs.

Recently, in recognition of their vital contributions, increasing duties, and extended deployments, National Guard and Reserve personnel were authorized full-time commissary benefits.

In 1991, to improve efficiency and increase taxpayer savings, Congress and the Department of Defense created the Defense Commissary Agency by consolidating the military services’ separate retail grocery operations into one organization. Since then, customer savings have increased from 20 to more than 30 percent, the agency opened 89 new stores, remodeled or made major renovations to over 60 existing stores, and upgraded and modernized over 100 more.

The number of items stocked by commissaries has also increased, from about 13,000 in the largest stores in 1991 to 22,500 in the biggest stores today.

Patrick B. Nixon, DeCA’s director and chief executive officer, said commissaries have become increasingly important in a time of tighter budgets, repeated combat deployments, and increased use of the Guard and Reserve.

“The commissary benefit helps our people in uniform and their Families,” Nixon said. “When forces deploy, the Families left behind depend on their local community services, including commissaries, to see them through. With 140 years of experience, the people of the Defense Commissary Agency plan to provide and continue to improve this highly valued military benefit for many years to come.”

Safety

From front page

The National Council on Fireworks Safety reminds all parents to be careful when using sparklers around children. More than 50 percent of sparkler related injuries happen to children under the age of 14.

The council also encourages parents to safely supervise the activities of their children when sparklers are present. While they appeal to children of all ages, sparklers are not toys.

The Installation Safety Division offers these suggestions for a safe holiday:

- Never allow young children to play with fireworks, and provide adult supervision if older children use fireworks.
- Never use bottle rockets.
- Never throw or point fireworks at other people.
- Never carry fireworks in a pocket.
- Whether an operator or spectator, wear safety glasses or goggles.
- Never put fireworks in glass containers, tin cans or clay pots, since these objects can shatter.
- Never use illegal or home-made fireworks.
- Always have a fire extinguisher or large container of water ready to douse any fireworks that misfire.
- Never re-light a ”dud” firework (wait 15 to 20 minutes and then soak it in a bucket of water).
- Dispose of fireworks properly by soaking them in water and then disposing of them in a metal trashcan.

Today’s fireworks are primarily appreciated for their beautiful visual effects rather than explosive noise. With the enactment of rigid safety standards for consumer fireworks, a Family can enjoy a safe backyard fireworks display.